

SCHOOL GOVERNORS CONFERENCE - 21 April 2009

Speech by Will Haire, DE Permanent Secretary

“Shaping Good Governance in the Interests of Learners”

Welcome And Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

You are very welcome here this morning to our annual conference for school governors.

This is our fourth year for hosting these conferences and it coincides with the last year of the 4 year term of office of the Boards of Governors of many schools. I would therefore like to thank you for your sterling service during the last 4 years. I appreciate that many of you will have given much longer service and I want to say that we value greatly the skills and experience that you bring to this public office. I also hope that many of you will volunteer to continue to serve as school governors as we move forward through a major transition of change in the next few years.

We appreciate and have high regard for the time and commitment that you devote to your role and responsibilities as a school governor. Those responsibilities are considerable, wide ranging and will remain largely unchanged in the foreseeable future.

We are however proposing to place one new statutory requirement on the Board of Governors of each grant-aided school from January 2010 to exercise its functions with a view to promoting the achievement of high standards of educational attainment by pupils registered at the school.

This duty is designed to formalise what many Boards of Governors are already seeking to achieve through their strategic school development plans and associated policies, aims and objectives. It also forms a very important part of the Department's strategic plan and policies for the whole education system and the wider transitional change process.

This first morning session of the conference is designed to give you an overview of the vision and goals set for the education system and how they can be translated into reality with good leadership. I would like to start that

session by speaking briefly about our core education strategy and how that impacts on your own role as governors in schools.

Strategy For Improvement

The Department is currently finalising for publication before the summer “Every School a Good School – A Strategy for School Improvement”. This will set out how improvement can be delivered at every level in our education system.

Our strategy for improvement is based on :-

- Raising standards for all;
- Improving access to high quality education;
- Developing the education workforce;
- Improving the learning environment; and
- Transforming education administration.

An important part of raising standards is Literacy and Numeracy. Our strategy here aims to raise standards for all young people and to reduce the gaps in achievement between the least and most disadvantaged.

To complement this, we need to improve access to high quality education, to ensure that every child, whatever his or her family or community back-ground, can achieve his or her full potential. In short, we need to do more to tackle disadvantage.

Extended Schools are building partnerships with parents to value education, and to encourage and provide stimulating learning experiences for their children. This helps children develop confidence and the will to succeed. The ETI confirms that extended schools have useful social and educational impacts.

We also have to address any disadvantages associated with special needs. Research points to the need for early intervention to tackle any problems a child may be having and to reduce the risk of long-term underachievement.

The development of the education workforce is the means of ensuring standards and access. No education system can be better than the quality of its teachers. I am pleased to acknowledge that the quality of our teaching force is impressive but we need to continue to pay attention to teacher development.

We need to have a proper learning environment. That means new buildings, better maintenance of existing ones and the better planning of the estate.

The reorganisation of administration and the creation of ESA is also part of our raising standards agenda. Indeed ESA will also be placed under a duty to exercise its functions with a view to promoting the achievement of high standards of educational attainment by pupils registered at grant-aided schools. Both DE and ESA will be judged on these educational outcomes.

Educational Outcomes

At the moment we attain 52% of young people achieving 5 GCSEs at A to C including Maths and English. That is the basic Employment level 2. Level 2 is what a young person has to achieve by age 18 to have a career. In that we are the best region in the UK but compared with International education outcomes, 52% of young people achieving level 2 is not very good.

However, if our young people are to prosper in a global commercial economy, we have to improve that to between 75% to 80%.

We have in short to radically improve the basic educational outcome of a quarter of our young people, to raise their outcomes above level 2.

And of course, above Level 2 we have to produce much higher levels, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths, on which our prosperity will be based.

And for those young people who encounter social, behavioural or learning barriers it means they will not achieve Level 2, and we have to improve their outcomes.

To help to achieve this, we have to ensure that pupils pass over from primary to post-primary education at the right level of attainment, ready to access the post-primary curriculum. And we need to ensure that the Foundation Stage delivers all it needs to pupils before they start primary education.

We also have to do more than just core educational outcomes. After 4 decades of turmoil and fragmentation, we have to help young people to be confident young

citizens, confident in their own traditions and respectful of all other traditions.

Effective Governance

Effective leadership is critical to the school improvement agenda and to raising standards in schools. That leadership must come from the Minister and the Department in the form of education policies which are firmly focused on school improvement and on making “Every School a Good School”.

This is no less the case for leaders serving in a voluntary capacity. You may not realise it but Boards of Governors are a vital part of our education system because you are in a position of leadership and one of the aims of these conferences is to highlight that. You also have one-eighth of the executive budget for education.

As representatives of the local community including church, staff, parental and funding authority interests, you are well placed to examine the key issues facing your school from different perspectives. This is the merit of enabling you to take important strategic decisions in relation to the visions, goals and governance of your own

school. In so doing, you are tasked with holding lead professionals and the school to account.

This does not mean that you have to be knowledgeable and up to date with professional developments in teaching and learning. But you will have a view of your own learning experiences at school or those of your children and you will also be aware of the challenges facing your school and its staff in relation to its place in the local community.

Some operational issues are complex, this is true, but in the board room, discussion should focus on how the issues on the agenda affect the vision and goals of the school.

You can help build good communications by encouraging the school's senior management team to reflect, analyse and explain to you the strategic issues affecting the school's development.

Principals and staff need to share with governors what contributes effectively to raising standards and what has not worked or what needs to be reconsidered or allocated more time and/or resources. They also need your help

and support. Don't underestimate your power to meet their needs simply because you are not a member of the teaching profession. It takes a combination of professionalism and good governance to get results.

Along with the Principal you can look at how the school budget might be deployed differently to achieve the school's aims. While we are in difficult financial times, it is worthwhile to look at existing spending patterns and to consider if there are benefits to be gained in making changes.

You will add value to the performance of your school when you work in genuine partnership with the Principal and his senior management team to focus on the things that really make a difference.

Strengthening relationships within and beyond the board room is a sure way to build confidence and to lead your school to success. It is important to celebrate and thank both colleagues and staff for their achievements. Strong working relationships are founded on a no blame culture which seeks to learn from and correct mistakes.

Having a clear view of your school's strengths and weaknesses helps you to contribute more effectively to strategic decisions. As many of you know, this comes with experience as you grow more familiar with the school and its community. It also helps you to contribute to the school based self evaluation process.

The School Development Plan is a tool to help you move your school forward towards improvement and its strategic goals in a concerted way. You are well placed to promote consultation on this plan within the wider school community and to set its priorities. But you have to be realistic as well and it is ok to defer action of some important issues to allow you to concentrate on your priorities.

Future Levels of Autonomy

These are just some of the ways in which a Board of Governors can make a tremendous difference to the educational outcomes and success of a school.

Please don't be put off by the long list of statutory responsibilities that go along with the job. Many of these responsibilities can be delegated and in small schools

where the scope for delegation may be restricted so usually is the volume of work that goes along with the job.

Some operational changes are of course inevitable under the Review of Public Administration in order to establish revised systems and support services under ESA for all grant-aided schools. For example, a new staff employment scheme could mean a change in procedures for some school Boards of Governors.

While this and other changes will have practical consequences for some schools, there are no plans to require Boards of Governors generally to assume higher levels of responsibility and autonomy than those with which they would be comfortable.

The new Education and Skills Authority will provide training and information sessions for governors on these changes, after the RPA legislation becomes law.

Summary

The Department's school improvement strategy is that Every School should be a Good School.

The Department will set policies and strategies to help bring this about. ESA will help challenge and support schools, but ultimately schools under the leadership of Boards of Governors and Principals will bring forward improvement at delivery level.

Thank you.